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The Pen Pal Project

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by Frankie Condon

One look at the power of a service learning project to connect writing center tutors with students in an inner-city elementary school.



Frankie Condon

In the early 1990's, at a CUNY writing center conference, I heard about a pen pal project between writing center tutors at an Eastern Pennsylvanian University and children from an inner-city primary school. I was intrigued by the description and filed the idea as one that I would like to try if ever I could create the opportunity. By the fall of 2002, conditions and circumstances seemed right to experiment at last with organizing a service-learning project that would connect writing center tutors from my university with children from an inner-city elementary school in a neighborhood that adjoins my university's.

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Simply put, the Saint Cloud State University Pen Pal Project connects university students enrolled in my writing center theory and practice course who are future and current tutors from the university's writing center with children in a multi-age classroom (first and second grades) at Lincoln Elementary School, one of District 742's inner city schools. The pen pals exchange 7 to 10 letters with one another over the course of a semester. Towards the end of the semester, the university students travel to Lincoln to work with their pen pals on a writing project. The letters exchanged by pen pals typically begin as exchanges of information about favorite friends, games, and classes or subjects. By the end of the project, pen pals are exchanging hints for defeating PlayStation 2 games, confidences about lost teeth, and bad dreams. In the spring of 2004, the writing project entailed creating a shield depicting each child's home, community, school, and future. University pen pals helped the children to design and color their shields and then to write an accompanying

story describing each of the four depictions. The semester culminated when the children traveled to the university's writing center for an end of the year celebration. There, they drew pictures with their pen pals, heard stories, had a snack and generally frolicked together.

Lincoln Elementary School is nestled between Division Street (a major St. Cloud thoroughfare) and a set of tracks along which dozens of freight trains pass each day. Days at Lincoln are punctuated by the long, slow, insistent whistles of those trains as they pass. Across Division Street is a bread factory, and often by the afternoon, the smell of fresh-baked bread has wafted over the pedestrian walkway, enveloping the school. Lincoln is a relatively small school with roughly 340 students ranging in age from 5 to 11 or 12. Approximately 64% of the students at Lincoln qualify for free or reduced lunches, a significantly higher percentage than at any other school in the district. And 9% of the students at Lincoln are transient, living in shelters, with relatives on an emergency basis, or in other sorts of temporary housing. Homelessness among students in the district's other schools, however, is virtually nonexistent.

I first visited Lincoln during the spring of 2002 while looking for an elementary school for my son, Dan. Walking down the hall that first day, I was struck by the quality of art on the walls. The writing and pictures proclaimed what students would do if they were mayor. I remember feeling warmed by the tenderness of those missives, many of which asserted that if the writer were mayor he or she would make sure that every child had a home to live in, enough food to eat, and lots and lots of love. Needless to say, we chose Lincoln for Dan, and it is through Dan that I came to know his teacher, Kathy Arnold.

Thus the Pen Pal Project became possible for a number of rather pragmatic reasons. I had a connection with a committed and interested teacher at Lincoln. The school's location was accessible to my university students. The children of the school could benefit from supplementary experiences with writing as well as the kinds of friendship and mentoring relationships that Mrs. Arnold and I hoped would form between tutors and their pen pals. The Pen Pal Project is successful, I think, for reasons that are far more difficult to articulate.

I must admit to some cynicism when I hear writing center directors describe in glowing terms some practice or set of practices with which they are currently enthralled. Therefore, I welcome you to engage as critical readers of what follows. I believe our discipline would be well served by some scholarship addressing writing centers and service learning. I'm so slaphappy about the Pen Pal Project, however, that I'm sure I'm not the right person to take a more measured look at it from a critical, scholarly perspective just yet.

That said, the Pen Pal Project has been the most joyful experience of my teaching, directing, and tutoring career. I have treasured watching from the most tentative beginnings friendships form between my students and the children with whom they exchange correspondence. The Pen Pal Project has made a different kind and depth of conversation possible in my writing center theory and practice course. In particular, our talk about the development and cultivation of voice has been deepened and extended by the Pen Pal Project.

In staff meetings and the writing center theory and practice course, the SCSU tutors have worried over the degree to which the student writing they encounter "sounds" stilted and imitative. The tutors struggle with their sense that student writing often fails to communicate the intellectual and creative engagement of the writer in the subject matter of his or her compositions. They

wonder whether and how to raise the matter of how a piece of writing represents its writer. They wonder how to work with students who seem unable to imagine a reader about whom they care or with whom they wish to communicate. Using our experiences in the Pen Pal Project, we can compare, for example, the kind and quality of voice in writing produced by children given more traditional academic prompts with the writing produced by the pen pals. Building on this conversation, we can talk about university student-writer engagement and writer alienation differently and better because of the Pen Pal Project. In particular, the Pen Pal Project has enabled tutors to understand in practice Vygotskii's concept of "zones of proximal development." They begin to recognize in their relationship with their pen pals the value of teaching not only the nature of reader expectations for particular genres, but also the processes by which such texts are produced and reader expectations are addressed and/or challenged and the kinds of labor such processes require. The tutors have begun not only to notice the difference between the writing produced by students who are working at the outside edge of their ability with assistance and the writing of students working alone, but also to imagine and test ways of talking with university student-writers about the relationship between writing, learning, teaching, and subjectivity.

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The Pen Pal Project seems to help current and future tutors to think in more creative and improvisational terms about the work of tutoring. Most interestingly and importantly to me, the Pen Pal Project has made possible a more reflective conversation about a writing center ethos and praxis that might be characterized by compassion, humility, and responsiveness. My students and tutors seem less inclined than formerly toward judgmental paternalism or toward some misplaced and misguided sense of altruism when they think and talk about the whys of what they do. The current and future tutors seem more inclined now toward a conviction that the privileges we possess do not belong to us—we have not, in fact, necessarily earned them. There might be alternative explanations for apparently dysfunctional student-writer behaviors and processes like the material conditions of students' lives and the degree to which systemic inequalities structure student consciousness.

The quality of relationships forged in and through the Pen Pal Project seems to me to have helped my students to grow as tutors in ways that I could not have taught them in any classroom or staff meeting. Truthfully, the children in Mrs. Arnold's class are teaching my students that which I most want my students to learn—and perhaps far more effectively than I could ever hope to do. Historian and critical race theorist Manning Marable once wrote that "grace is the ability to redefine the limits of possibility." For me, and, I believe, for my students, tutors, and the children of Mrs. Arnold's class, the Pen Pal Project continues to be an instantiation of grace understood in this way. Together, we are redefining the limits of possibility not only within our institutions, but also in our relationships with one another.

University. She earned her B.F.A. honors degree from York University, her masters degree from Clarion University of Pennsylvania, and her Ph.D. from the State University of New York, Albany. Frankie served as director of the **Writing Center at SCSU** for four years and currently serves as the director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. She is the chair of the Midwest Writing Centers Association, a member of the board of the International Writing Centers Association, and conference chair of the IWCA/NCPTW Conference to be held in Minneapolis in the fall of 2005. Frankie and her husband, Mike, have three children: Dan (8), Lucy (6), and Grace (4).

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